

NEWS IN brief

Obama, Park ready to 'engage' N Korea

US President Barack Obama and his South Korean counterpart Park Geun-Hye, who is visiting Washington, stressed their readiness to "engage" nuclear-armed North Korea Friday, albeit with conditions. If Pyongyang is willing to curb nuclear and missile programs that have "achieved nothing except to deepen North Korea's isolation," Obama said, "I think it's fair to say we will be right there at the table."

Pakistan arrests 27 Indian fishermen

Pakistan yesterday arrested 27 Indian fishermen and impounded their four boats for allegedly fishing in its territorial waters in the Arabian Sea, a Pakistani maritime security official said. Such arrests are frequently carried out by both countries, as the maritime border is poorly defined and many fishing boats lack the technology needed to be certain of their precise location.

Lankan Tamil prisoners quits hunger strike

Around 200 Tamil prisoners, who were on a fast in different jails across Sri Lanka since Monday demanding that they be immediately released, yesterday decided to suspend their agitation following President Maithripala Sirisena's intervention. The prisoners were arrested during Sri Lanka's 37-year civil war for suspected involvement with Tamil rebels fighting for a separate homeland for the ethnic minority.



Protestors sit in fake blood next to the entrance of the Eurostar train at the Saint Pancras rail station in London on Late Friday, during a demonstration calling for the government to open the United Kingdom's borders and guarantee the safe arrival of migrants and refugees into the country.

Human ping pong on

Thousands flood into Slovenia after Hungary shuts border; Twelve more die off Turkey coast

Croatia yesterday diverted the flow of thousands of migrants toward Slovenia after Hungary sealed its border to block the path of the streams of refugees desperate to reach northern Europe.

Slovenia received the first buses from Croatia transporting the migrants as a much-hyped EU deal with Turkey to defuse the crisis -- which has seen some 600,000 mostly Syrian migrants enter the EU this year -- began to look shaky.

The continent's worst refugee crisis since 1945 has opened up rifts among the 28 EU member states and put unprecedented strain on the right to freedom of movement that is at the core of the bloc's values.

In the latest tragedy, 12 migrants drowned yesterday when their boat sank off the Turkish coast as they were seeking to reach Greece, Turkey's Anatolia news agency reported.

The Turkish coastguard recovered the bodies from the wooden boat, which had sailed from northwest Turkey's seaside town of Ayvalik for the Greek island of Lesbos.

MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE



Hungarian police and soldiers sealed its border with Croatia barbed wire shortly before 1:00am (2300 GMT Friday), after the last 1,500 or so migrants to arrive by train on the Croatian side trudged silently through mud over the informal Zakany crossing, and AFP correspondent said.

The two official border posts of Beremend and Letenje remain open for those with valid papers.

Croatia -- which has repeatedly slammed Budapest's migrants' policy as "unacceptable" -- reacted by diverting the flow of migrants from Hungary toward Slovenia.

Hungary's right-wing government had already sealed its frontier with

non-EU neighbour Serbia in mid-September -- until then the main entry point into the EU for migrants fleeing conflict and poverty in the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

This however merely diverted the flow of people to Croatia, which began to transport the migrants by trains and buses to Hungary.

But Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusic warned Friday that if Slovenia and Germany closed their borders, Croatia would be forced to do the same.

"Slovenia will not close its border unless Germany closes its border, in that case Croatia will have to do the same... There is no alternative," she told HRT state-run television.

Most migrants are trying to get to Germany, Europe's economic powerhouse, which has said it expects up to one million asylum seekers this year.

Hungary, a member of the EU and the passport-free Schengen zone, said it had decided to close the frontier with Croatia after its call for deploying EU forces to Greece's borders -- where the migrants arrive -- had failed to spark action at an EU summit in Brussels on Thursday.

Beijing tries to soothe S China Sea jitters

Beijing sought to soothe tensions over its South China Sea claims yesterday, saying it will avoid the use of force in the region as the US ponders sending warships close to territory claimed by the Asian giant. Speaking at the Xiangshan regional defence forum in Beijing, Fan Changlong, vice-chair of China's Central Military Commission, pledged that the country would "never recklessly resort to the use of force, even on issues bearing on sovereignty". "We have done our utmost to avoid unexpected conflicts," he added.

The US says that China's transformation of South China Sea reefs into artificial islands capable of hosting military facilities presents a threat to freedom of navigation, and defence officials have hinted they may soon use naval forces to test Chinese claims.

But Fan said that the projects were mainly intended for civilian use and "will not affect freedom of navigation in the South China Sea".

"Instead, they will enable us to provide better public services to aid navigation and production in the South China Sea."

The argument is one Beijing has made many times before, but satellite images of the islands published by the US think-tank Center for Strategic and International Studies have shown as many as three runways on the islands that could accommodate fighter jets, raising concerns about China's true intentions.

Speaking in Washington this week, Pentagon chief Ashton Carter said the US would continue to sail wherever international law allowed.

Defending 'national interests', not Assad

Russian PM says on Syria move

Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev yesterday said that Russia is fighting for its national interests in Syria, not for President Bashar al-Assad.

"Of course we are not fighting for specific leaders, we are defending our national interests, on the one hand," Medvedev said in an interview to air on state television.

"And secondly, we have a request from the lawful authorities (of Syria). That is the basis we are working on," he said, quoted on the government website.

Medvedev said Russia in Syria is defending itself against the threat of Islamist extremists coming to its own country.

"The president said this: it's obvious that if we don't destroy these terrorists there, they will come to Russia."

Medvedev said that it did not matter to Russia who heads Syria in the future, as long as it is not the Islamic State jihadist group.

"Who will lead Syria should be decided by the Syrian people," Medvedev said.

On the ground, Syrian regime forces yesterday edged forward in the northern province of Aleppo with air cover from Russian warplanes, but faced fierce resistance from rebel forces in the country's centre.

Since Moscow began its air campaign in support of its Damascus ally on September 30, the army and its allies have launched four ground offensives against rebel forces in northern and central Syrian provinces of Aleppo, Hama, Homs and Latakia against al-Qaeda affiliate Al-Nusra Front and other rebel groups.

Troops seized at least five villages and several strategic hilltops south of the city yesterday, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said. That brought them to the edges of Al-Hader, 25 kilometres from Aleppo.

A US official said as many as 2,000 fighters from Iran and its regional allies were supporting the army's offensive in coordination with Russia.

He said that over the previous 24 hours, 17 rebels and eight pro-regime fighters had been killed. Some 2,000 families fled the fighting.

In total, more than 250,000 people have been killed in the Syrian conflict since it began in March 2011.

In Iraq, Iraqi forces yesterday pressed their biggest offensive in months to resume their long-stalled northward advance and disrupt jihadist lines, security officers said.

After recapturing parts of Baiji and the huge nearby refinery complex from the Islamic State group, security and allied paramilitary forces thrust further northward up the main highway leading to Mosul.

They reached the town of Zawiya and vowed to push on to Sharqat, the northernmost town in Salaheddin province before the border with Nineveh province, of which Mosul is the capital.

Reclaiming control of that stretch of road and the villages along it would contribute to isolating IS strongholds east of the Tigris, such as Hawijah, from the self-proclaimed caliphate's heartland on the other side of the river.



Aleppo, Homs offensives face resistance from rebels

Iraq forces push north in a bid to reshape battlefield

Anger in Delhi after new shocking rapes

AFP, New Delhi

A toddler and a five-year-old girl were raped in separate attacks in New Delhi overnight with at least one gang-raped, police said yesterday, as activists warned of an "epidemic" of sexual violence in the capital.

The two-and-a-half-year-old girl was abducted from a religious event in west Delhi by two men on Friday night and raped before being dumped in a park near her home, relatives and police said.

In a separate incident on the other side of the city, the five-year-old was lured to a neighbour's house and raped by three men, a police officer told AFP.

An agitated crowd of more than 100 people gathered near the toddler's home late yesterday afternoon attempting to block traffic and lambasting the police's failure to make arrests in the case, according to an AFP reporter at the scene.

"They (police) are not doing anything to arrest the rapists. We don't feel

safe in this city and there will be a day when parents will stop giving birth to girls fearing they will be raped," a female relative of the girl told reporters without giving her name.

Police said they have launched a manhunt on the 2-year-old's case but no arrests have been made so far. Authorities have released CCTV footage of two men riding away on a motorbike with the victim in an attempt to catch the alleged perpetrators.

Separately, police in eastern Delhi arrested three men overnight in the case of the five-year-old victim, whom tests showed was raped

We don't feel safe in this city and there will be a day when parents will stop giving birth to girls fearing they will be raped.



An Indian woman shouts at a police personnel during a protest near the home of a minor girl who was raped in New Delhi, yesterday.

multiple times, after locals managed to catch her alleged assailants.

Both girls are undergoing medical treatment but are believed to be out of danger.

The latest attacks come eight days after a four-year-old girl was allegedly raped and slashed with a blade before being abandoned by a railway track in the capital.

"When will Delhi wake up? Till when will girls continue to be brutalized in Indian capital. Gangrape of 2.5 year n 5 year old. Shameful," Delhi Commission for Women chairwoman Swati Maliwal tweeted.

Maliwal told Indian television station NDTV that violence against women had assumed "epidemic proportions" in Delhi.

BOKO HARAM MENACE US steps up fight against militants

AFP, Washington

The United States will conduct surveillance and intelligence operations against Boko Haram inside Nigeria, sources familiar with the plan told AFP Friday, a significant escalation of Washington's role in combatting the Islamist group.

The operations will be carried out as part of the recently announced deployment of up to 300 US military personnel to neighboring Cameroon, officials said.

"This is going to be part of our Boko Haram efforts that will be operating throughout the region," one of the sources said on condition of anonymity.

It will not include boots on the ground or offensive combat, but will see US military operations against Boko Haram in Africa's most populous country for the first time.

"It's surveillance and intelligence gathering, not anything offensive," said the same source.

US President Barack Obama on Wednesday announced he would send up to 300 military personnel to Cameroon. Approximately 145 have already arrived in the country.

According to Pentagon officials, the US Department of Defense also has approximately 250 personnel in Niger and 85 in Chad conducting training and surveillance missions.

Nigeria greeted that announcement as a "welcome development."



Reform 'unfair' US criminal justice system

Urges Obama

AFP, Washington

President Barack Obama urged reform of the US criminal justice system yesterday, saying much of it "remains unfair" and that punishments should correspond to the severity of crimes.

"The United States is home to five percent of the world's population, but 25 percent of the world's prisoners," Obama said in his weekly radio address. "Every year, we spend \$80 billion to keep people locked up."

The president said the reason the United States has such a high prison population -- 2.2 million -- is that more non-violent offenders have been put behind bars over the past decades than ever before.

Despite efforts to address the matter, "much of our criminal justice system remains unfair," Obama said. "In recent years, more of our eyes have been opened to this truth. We can't close them anymore."

He called on the Republican-controlled Congress to send reform bills to his desk to sign into law and said he would be traveling around the country to highlight the issue in the coming weeks.

Obama's comments came as the United States prepares to release thousands of prisoners considered at low risk of returning to crime, as part of an effort to ease prison overcrowding and redress overly harsh sentences.

The measure stands to benefit petty criminals and drug users sentenced to long prison terms for minor, non-violent offenses.

RACE TO WHITE HOUSE

Hillary Clinton backs Obama's Afghan move

AP, Keene

Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Rodham Clinton said she supports President Barack Obama's decision to keep 5,500 US troops in Afghanistan when he leaves the White House in 2017.

Clinton said Friday in an interview with CNN that Obama's moves were an example of "a leader who has strong convictions about what he would like to see happen but also pays attention to what's going on in the real world."

Clinton, who served as Obama's secretary of state during his first term, said the US wants to bring its troops home and "we certainly don't want them engaged in on-the-ground combat. We want them to help support and train the Afghan army."

Trump blames GW Bush for 9/11

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Donald Trump is still Donald Trump. During an interview on Bloomberg TV on Friday, Trump was asked how he would make Americans safe and proud while dealing with potential crisis.

"I think I have a bigger heart than all of them. I think I'm much more competent than all of them. When you talk about George Bush -- I mean, say what you want, the World Trade Center came down during his time."

Yes, the Republican front-runner said that former President George W Bush is somewhat responsible for the September 2001 attacks that took the lives of 2,977 people in New York City, Washington DC and Shanksville, Pennsylvania.

Bloomberg anchor Stephanie Ruhle immediately interjects telling him: "Hold on, you can't blame George Bush for that."

However, it was too late, Trump continued to air out his feelings toward the Republican establishment: "He was president, okay? Blame him or don't blame him but he was president. The World Trade Center came down during his reign."



Benghazi panel grills Clinton aide Huma

REUTERS, Washington

Turmoil swirled again around the Republican-controlled Benghazi committee on Friday as it questioned a senior aide to Hillary Clinton, prompting fresh accusations that the panel was created to damage the Democratic front-runner's presidential campaign.

In a six-hour closed door interview, members and staff sought answers from Huma Abedin, for years a close confidante of Clinton. Abedin has served as the former secretary of state's assistant at the time of the 2012 attacks on US diplomatic facilities in Benghazi, Libya that killed four Americans.

Abedin, now campaign vice chairwoman of Clinton's 2016 presidential campaign, said little about the interview.

Suu Kyi calls for unity in divided Rakhine

AFP, Thandwe

Myanmar's Aung San Suu Kyi yesterday called for unity in volatile Rakhine state in an impassioned election rally, tackling head-on bitter religious divisions between Buddhists and Muslims that have shaken the former junta-run nation.

The opposition leader has faced international disappointment at her reluctance to speak out for marginalised Rohingya Muslims in the western state, but is also viewed with suspicion by Buddhist hardliners who see her as sympathetic to the minority.

In a speech to hundreds of supporters in Thandwe town, Suu Kyi said it was critical that people nationwide could live "without discrimination based on race and religion".

"All citizens in the union need to unite... great hatred and fear does not benefit our country," she said, repeating recent assertions that her political opponents had tried to use religion as a tool in campaigns for the November 8 polls.

Myanmar's general elections are tipped to be the freest in generations for a nation

that languished in poverty and isolation under almost half a century of military rule.

Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) -- contesting its first nationwide vote in 25 years -- is expected to shunt out the army-backed ruling party, which has overseen a quasi-civilian transition since junta rule ended in 2011.

But there are rising fears that the polls could act as a flashpoint for religious intolerance that has festered in Myanmar since deadly unrest between Buddhists and Muslims swept Rakhine in 2012, later spreading to other parts of the country.

Those anxieties were on display at the rally Saturday where Suu Kyi took questions from both Buddhists and Muslims.

Asked by a Muslim man how the NLD would prevent religious discrimination, the veteran activist said a government under her party would prioritise the rule of law, a common response from the Nobel laureate.

But she slammed a Buddhist asking her to respond to rumours that her party would usher in a Muslim take-over of the country, saying the very question risked "inciting racial or religious conflict".

